

# Policy Recommendations to Promote Community Food Security in Hartford

December 2009

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy was established in 1991 by the Hartford City Council to implement the recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on Hunger that year. Its purpose is to integrate all agencies in the city in a common effort to improve the availability of safe and nutritious food at reasonable prices for all residents, particularly those in need.

The ordinance that created the Commission set forth four goals for the city's food policy:

- To eliminate hunger as an obstacle to a happy, healthy and productive life in the city.
- To ensure that a wide variety of safe and nutritious food is available for city residents.
- To ensure that access to food is not limited by economic status, location or other factors beyond a resident's control.
- To ensure that the price of food in the city remains at a level approximating the level for the state.

These goals are as relevant today as when the Commission first began. The current recession has created tremendous hardships for low-income Hartford residents who are struggling to obtain healthy food and other basic necessities. Based on a USDA study released in November 2009, Connecticut witnessed a 34% increase in the percentage of households experiencing *food insecurity*, a term that describes the situation of not always being able to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods due to limited or uncertain resources. The number of food insecure households in Connecticut rose from slightly more than 8% during the 2003-2005 period to 11% during the 2006-2008 period. Connecticut's percentage of

households with very low *food security*, i.e. those experiencing hunger and skipping meals on a frequent basis, rose a staggering 58% between the 2003-2005 period and 2006-2008 period. A county-by-county analysis of the food stamp program published in November 2009 by the *New York Times*, also based on USDA data, found a 20% increase in food stamp enrollment in Hartford County above the 2007 level.



Applicants line up early in the morning at the Department of Social Services to enroll in the Food Stamp Program, now known as SNAP.

Hartford's rising level of food insecurity is driven by a national recession which economists now recognize as the most severe downturn in a generation. Yet there are practical steps that can be taken locally to alleviate hunger and provide Hartford residents with greater assistance during this time of exceptional need. As part of its advisory role to city officials, the Commission has prepared this list of recommendations on food and nutrition issues. We stand ready to partner with all agencies in the city on these important efforts.



City of Hartford  
**Advisory Commission on Food Policy**

## Expand Enrollment in the Food Stamp/SNAP Program

In 2008 the Food Stamp Program's name officially changed to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). The program operates essentially the same as before, however. Hartford residents need this help now more than ever, yet in too many cases SNAP is an example of federal resources that are bypassing the city due to insufficient enrollment. SNAP helps low-income people purchase food for themselves and their families. SNAP caseloads tend to expand

and contract depending on economic conditions. While the program has been growing recently, too many people are still left out.

*The Food Pantry Grant Program should promote the following "best practices" for food pantries, with resources targeted to the programs that best fulfill these standards:*

1) *Client choice:* Clients should be allowed to choose the items they want rather than being handed a pre-packed bag of food. Would you want someone else deciding what you and your family will eat?

2) *Adequate food:* Clients should be trusted to take the amount of food they feel they need. For hard to supply items, the pantry may need to place limits based on family size.

3) *Adequate access:* Clients should be able to visit the pantry as often as needed. Pantries should consider opening some evenings or weekends so clients who work are better able to access services.

4) *Respectful and dignified client intake:* Clients should be asked a minimum number of questions in order to receive food. Residency, household size, special dietary needs and income level are all you may want to ask each year. Requesting food assistance is hard enough for clients – an intensive intake process can make it even harder.

5) *Use of Foodbank products:* Hartford pantries are fortunate to have Foodshare, the regional food bank, as a cost-efficient means to stock their inventories and avoid duplication of separate food drives. Getting inventory from Foodshare allows pantries to stretch their dollars much farther than if donors purchased food items and gave it to pantries directly.

6) *Healthy foods:* Fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and dairy products should be available to clients. Remember, we are what we eat!

7) *Referrals and coordination with other agencies:* Clients should be provided with information or services that will help them address the root causes of their need for food assistance. The pantry should also coordinate with other agencies in fighting hunger and poverty in its community, and contact local legislators and government officials on food policy issues.

The number of Connecticut residents receiving SNAP has increased by 48% compared to five years ago, as the recession drives more families into poverty. Connecticut has historically maintained a low level of SNAP participation rate in comparison to the total number of eligible residents, with only two-thirds of those legally entitled to SNAP benefits actually receiving them. With more than 2,000 SNAP clients per caseworker and long waits to process new applications, the state should transfer additional staff immediately to help more clients enroll in the program. Hartford's delegation to the Connecticut General Assembly should be urged by city officials to streamline applications during the current economic crisis.

State resources are also needed to expand the Food Stamp/SNAP Outreach Program, which targets special populations including immigrants, homeless people, and families with young children. This outreach facilitates SNAP applications and boosts enrollment.

## Continue the Food Pantry Grant Program

We commend the city for continuing the Food Pantry Grant Program, which began as a pilot initiative in 2006 and has extended the capacity and services of local pantries. With these resources, food pantries have expanded hours for working families, provided referrals to other human needs programs, and purchased new equipment to expand the availability of refrigerated items like fresh produce. Current grantees include the Community Renewal Team's Family Services Centers, the Village for Families and Children for the Village South Food Pantry, Bethel Mission AME Church for its Community Food Pantry, and the New Testament Church of God for the Helping Hands Food Pantry.

Due to budget constraints, the Food Pantry Grant Program was reduced from \$60,000 to \$55,000 this year. We urge the city to hold the line against any further reductions to this vital program.

## **Increase Awareness of the WIC Program**

The Special Supplemental Nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is a federal program that serves recent and expectant mothers and young children. WIC provides a monthly supplement of nutritious foods to eligible participants. In October 2009, WIC came out with a new food package in an effort to address the nation's overweight and obesity problem. The new food package includes vegetables, fruits, and food items rich in whole grains. These changes provide more flexibility for WIC nutritionists in meeting individual needs for nutrition, personal preference, and cultural eating habits.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health has estimated that 12,000 Hartford residents are eligible for WIC, a significantly higher number than the 10,000 client caseload in recent years. In light of the current recession, we recommend that city officials use local resources to increase the visibility of the WIC program. This modest investment will leverage a far greater sum of federally funded nutrition benefits that Hartford families desperately need.

## **Support the Summer Food Program**

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal child nutrition program that allows kids 18 years or younger to receive free meals while school is out for the summer. Without this program, youth who rely on subsidized school lunches would risk a gap in healthy eating during the time that school is not in session. Hartford actually has two SFSP programs, one of which operated by Hartford Public Schools and the other by the City of Hartford's Division of Recreation. These two efforts provided free breakfasts and lunches to more than 70 locations throughout the city and served an additional 20,000 meals last summer as a result of additional locations and the increased demand due to the tough economy.

We urge city and school administrators to publicize SFSP more aggressively, since the number of youth participating in summer meals is only a fraction of the number benefiting from subsidized meals during the months when school is open. Flyers should be sent home to notify families of SFSP site locations, both as classroom handouts and as an insert in high-priority mailings like the final report card. Summer youth programs should be encouraged to partner with Hartford Public Schools or the Recreation Division, and school administrators should address any interruption in services due to a late start date for summer school, should future years continue the revised schedule that began in 2009.

## **Support Farmers Markets in Hartford**

We commend the Hartford Department of Health and Human Services for spearheading the effort to launch last year's North End Farmers Market. The city is fortunate to have six Connecticut-grown certified farmers markets, as well as an array of produce vendors at the Hartford Regional Farmers Market. However, most of these farmers markets are concentrated in a narrow east-west band across the center of Hartford.

City officials should continue to support new markets in the north and south neighborhoods of the city, such as the North End Farmers Market, to make fruits and vegetables more accessible for all residents. We recommend that the Department of Health and Human Services help launch a South End Farmers Market in the Barry Square or Southwest neighborhoods.

## **Ban Trans Fatty Acids**

Medical research has linked partially hydrogenated cooking oils with higher risk of cardiovascular disease. Jurisdictions across the nation are acting on this health risk by banning the use of these products. Hartford should implement a similar trans fat ban.



*Farmers markets like this one in Hartford's North End help family farmers and bring fresh food directly to the neighborhoods where fresh produce is often scarce.*

While a trans fat ban in Hartford would require food service establishments to change in the type of cooking oils, shortening, and margarine they use, non-hydrogenated versions of these products are widely available. A phased implementation of the ban would allow restaurants to switch to these alternatives. Like trans fat bans that have been adopted in other places, Hartford's ban should also exempt food items sold in manufacturers' sealed packaging.

### **Show Calorie Counts at Chain Restaurants**

Hartford should require chain restaurants of 15 or more outlets in Connecticut to disclose the calories of their regular entrees. Many consumers are unaware of the high caloric content of seemingly ordinary meals, particularly at fast food outlets. Public disclosure of this information is a reasonable policy in light of the city's near-epidemic obesity rate.

Earlier this year California enacted a law to this effect with the cooperation of the California Restaurant Association. The California statute covers chains of 20 or more outlets and allows calorie counts to be presented in brochures until 2011, at which time this information must appear on menus or menu boards. New York City has also adopted calorie counts on chain menus, using a 15-outlet threshold. The market impact of California and New York City's calorie count requirement make this same policy workable in Hartford. All of the major chains in Hartford – McDonalds, Dunkin Donuts, Burger King, Starbucks, KFC, etc. – have substantial market presence in California or New York City, where calorie count policies are already in force and menu items are fairly uniform.

### **Create Transparency in Restaurant Scoring**

Hartford should implement a policy that requires food service establishments to post their most recent inspection scores in a visible place. This requirement already applies to restaurants in many Connecticut towns (Avon, Barkhamsted, Canton, Colebrook, East Granby, Farmington, Granby, Hartland, New Hartford, and Simsbury).

Posting inspection results at food service establishments would help consumers make informed decisions and give food service establishments greater incentives to comply with state and local health requirements. Greater transparency in these areas will help reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses in Hartford.

### **Promote Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture at the Plaza Mayor Site**

Food production within the city generates tons of fresh produce every year through community gardens and urban agriculture programs. A major expansion of these efforts could be achieved over the next few years by growing crops at the vacant Plaza Mayor site. Until this property is developed for other purposes, it represents an eyesore in the neighborhood. The city should partner with community organizations and individual gardeners to bring these two vacant lots into production for food that can be distributed to people in need. The Commission recommends thorough soil testing to ensure the safety of all food harvested at the site, as well as sustainable agricultural practices so that this temporary use of the property leaves the site in an ecologically better state for future development.

In addition to the opportunity presented now at the Plaza Mayor site, the city should also survey vacant lots that it owns to identify appropriate sites for community gardens. Plaza Mayor offers a template for how underutilized tracts of land can be put into production to feed the people of Hartford.

The Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy can be reached in care of:

**HARTFORD**   
**FOOD SYSTEM**